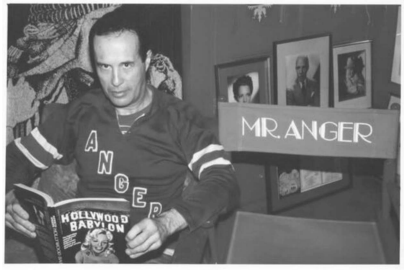
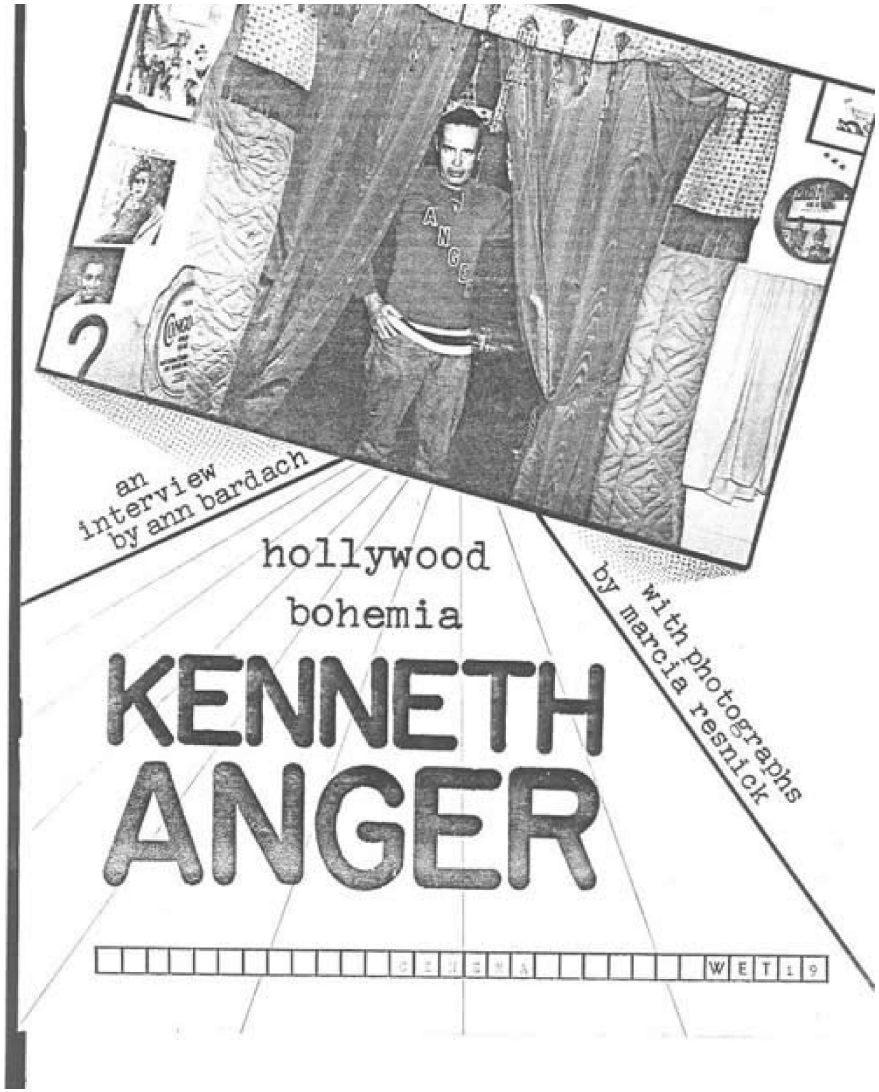


Kenneth Anger



Kenneth Anger, cover of WET Magazine, 1980

WET Magazine

Hollywood Bohemia

An interview with Kenneth Anger by A. L. Bardach

Oscar Levant once quipped, "Under the fake tinsel of Hollywood lies the real

tinsel of Hollywood." Kenneth Anger's book, *Hollywood Babylon*, illustrates the

quality of Hollywood tinsel in all its glitter, gloss and grit. A history of the movie industry based on its seamier 'outtakes', *Hollywood Babylon* has been selling steadily for twenty years.

Hollywood Babylon II will be published by Times Books in Spring 1981. Although Anger, who recently turned 50, has been making movies since his teens, it was not until the release of *Scorpio Rising* in 1963 that he won fame as an underground filmmaker. *Scorpio Rising,* a documentary of Brooklyn motorcycle gangs, spawned new schools of film criticism and film making.

In March, *Lucifer Rising* a film that he has worked on for the last ten years, will be screened at the Kennedy Center as part of an American Film Institute Festival. Called a "devil worshiper," Anger replies, "The only devil I've ever worshipped is Mickey Mouse." The film's score was composed by Bobby Beausoleil (of Charlie Manson fame) and his "Freedom Orchestra" from behind the bars of Tracy Prison near Stockton, California.

Works in progress are: Anger's Autographs, a collection of 500 autographed photos including Jayne Mansfield and Theda Bara ("Her first name is an anagram for *death*, her last an anagram for *Arab*," explains Anger, "though she was really a nice Jewish girt from Cincinnati.") and

Once photographer Marcia Resnick and I crossed the threshold through the Looking Glass of Kenneth Anger's apartment, we became miniatures in a sumptuous jewelry box of four small chambers,- a five floor NYC walk-up, railroad flat in its previous incarnation. Each square foot of wall, ceiling and floor space confronts visitors with the face of a silent screen siren or a World War II movie classic.

The lights blink, red and white neon, the gramaphone croons June-Moon tunes and to make a call you must remove the receiver from Mickey Mouse's hand....

ALB: Were you born in California?

Kenneth Anger: Yes, Santa Monica. I was a Depression baby. I arrived with the bad news abut the stock market. February 3, 1930. I was born during a bad fog and when my grandmother drove me home she had to stop in her old Packard every few feet to make sure the car wouldn't go off the cliffs into the water.

ALB: When did you first get interested in movies?

KA: When I was three or four years old. I was in a dance school. Expressive dancing. It was run by a Diaghilev dropout named Theodore Kosloff who was seduced by Hollywood money in the twenties and danced for Cecil B. DeMille. Theodore Kosloff played the god Electricity in *Madame Satan*. He acted in a few other films, then he founded a dance school which competed with the Meglin kiddies [Mrs. Meglin's Dance Studio located in Santa Monica], only

ALB: When did you decide to be in the film business? I mean either writing or directing.

KA: I was selected by Warner Brothers to play the Changeling Prince in Max Reinhardt's *Midsummer's Night Dream* in 1934. I was a little kid, four years old and about three feet tall. It was a mime part [with] dancing and I had to cry and be kidnapped by Oberon. When I saw Warner Brothers and I saw all those trees painted silver on the set and the costumes and everything, I was completely bowled over. I wanted a studio of my own. The thing that I really remember was the day the cellophane moonbeams caught on fire. The arc lights were too close to the stretched cellophane that the children were supposed to run down. The little fairy kids also had cellophane costumes. That was dangerous. Today they wouldn't permit it. The kids had to scamper up and down the moonbeams. All of this crunch, crunch of cellophane through Mendelssohn music. It puffed with smoke and all started to go. There was a little panic, but it looked so beautiful. The kids scattered. A couple of them got their rumps singed a little bit; no damage really. It was so beautiful.

ALB: You didn't work in films again?

KA: Not in the industry, no. When I graduated from Beverly Hills High School, my grandmother gave me the money to go to Paris to meet Jean Cocteau.

ALB: Did you meet Cocteau?

festival called the Festival of Damned Films for films that could never be shown publicly for censorship reasons or whatever. Cocteau was the chairman of the jury and the film won a prize. He sent me a little fan letter - an honor - no money or anything.

ALB: Where did you stay in Paris? With Cocteau?

KA: Hell, no. I met Cocteau. He sort of patted me on the back. I saw him several times. He was the only person who wrote me a fan letter at that stage of my life. I stayed in Paris all through the Fifties. Almost ten years. That's where I wrote the first version of *Hollywood Babylon*. It was in French. I wrote it to get some money to stay on in Paris. That was in 1959. I came back to America in 1963 and made *Scorpio Rising*. It was a little like visiting a foreign country. I had been away almost ten years. Brooklyn was as strange to me as darkest Africa.

ALB: Was *Hollywood Babylon* successful by then?

KA: It was very successful in France. It went through a few editions.

ALB: But it hadn't boomed over here yet?

How can I collect? He put everything in his wife's name and then he went to prison for tax evasion. He's doing eight years right now. That edition was suppressed. All the copies of it that could be found were destroyed.

ALB: How did you make *Scorpio Rising*?

KA: I went to Coney Island as I was wont to do around 1963. There was this friendly gang of motorcyclists near the Cyclone. Not Hells Angels, but a little Brooklyn gang of Italians who worked in the Fulton Fish Market. They were showing off these incredibly surrealistic machines they had built that had ten tail fins and twenty exhaust pipes and fifty headlights. This was before this kind of thing got discovered as folk art. I was really flipped out over these things and they let me photograph them and their parties, their private lives, their rooms. Working completely alone. They accepted me as being kind of a camera nut.

ALB: When *Scorpio Rising* came out and did so well, did you get offers from studios?

KA: I had some little talks. I never went down to actually see anybody. At that time things like *Easy Rider* were being made also. Some hippie types were getting a few offers.

ALB: Did you know Dennis Hopper?

but that was about as far as it went. His mind is cracked. He has flashes of brilliance, but he takes too much coke and stuff. He's really damaged himself . He went to pieces making *The Last Movie*. It was sort of the last of Dennis. I don't know, he might come back and do something later. He's actually quite a good actor. Maybe as an older guy he'll be a character actor of some kind.

ALB: In the late Sixties, it seemed like many in Hollywood were using methedrine [speed]. Do you know the Nazis invented methedrine.

KA: You'd better believe it. It was invented so Luftwaffe pilots could do their round trip flights bombing London and not fall asleep. Then it was used everywhere by the S.S. Many of the atrocities were actually freak-out highs. Everyone was stoned on methedrine.

ALB: Are there any drugs that you've felt you had to avoid?

KA: I began smoking pot when I was fourteen. My first marijuana cigarette was presented to me by Anais Nin. I'd known her for years. I used speed off and on for about five years and then it began to do nasty tricks to me. The fantasies got too ugly. I would begin to see people, maybe more accurately, but in a very bad light and I would feel like attacking them. Speed brought out the killer in me. Paranoia, I suppose.

KA: A big junkie or something? No. I've seen enough people go down the tubes. I've tried things and then seen what was good for me and what wasn't. I've tried opium two or three times. Opium is sort of like the King of Drugs. It's the aristocrat of drugs. I still occasionally take a little speed if I have a deadline.

One thing we haven't mentioned that came into my life was LSD. That was quite interesting. For awhile anyway. I used to see real Technicolor trips with the waltz and the rumba. I mean very colorful, bright colors. I don't know whether my brain burned out or what, but it doesn't register anymore. Maybe the quality of the stuff is so bad now that it doesn't do what it used to. I guess you can't get the real thing anymore. I used to see things like a desert sky with stars and the stars would turn into showgirls and diamonds and things like that. I can't work on LSD. It was something to have fun on. All this mystical bullshit about it - that was dangerous. Some people can't handle it. The sort of people [who] jumped out of windows and thought they were birds obviously couldn't handle it. So LSD was a dangerous joke. What isn't dangerous? I mean even hair dryers are dangerous.

ALB: Did you ever have a bad acid trip?

KA: Well, not really. I had ones where I did things I shouldn't do. I got arrested for disturbing the peace once. I was breaking windows. Actually, I got Mick Jagger breaking windows. He did it. I broke the windows in the house next to his house in London. Then, that weekend he had a party. It was before he married - that horrible marriage. This would be like, well; when did he marry that Bianca creep? Five, six, it would have to be eight years ago. He had rented this

ALB: The Thames, I think, not the Seine.

KA: Yes. This is a small town outside of London. A forty minute drive to get there. And they pulled the plug. So then Mick picked up a table and threw it through a huge plate glass window that overlooked the Thames and terrace outside. To me this was so tacky of him. Of course, he could afford to pay and have everything replaced. He had got the idea of breaking glass from my breaking glass.

ALB: Do you always connect violence and sexuality in your work?

KA: *Scorpio Rising* was a documentary. I was filming a phenomenon that happened. I didn't direct the phenomenon. I didn't add anything to the scene that as not there already. The only thing I did was add my participation with the camera. And the fact that I believe quite strongly - with a camera in their presence - people act differently than when cameras aren't present. People exaggerate a little, show off if they have an exhibitionistic streak like the kids at the Halloween party in the film. I don't know if they always take their pants down. They did that with their girlfriends watching when I was there. They wouldn't let me photograph their girlfriends. That's very Italian. They let their girlfriends watch all this carrying on but they didn't want me to photograph them. They were sweet, innocent kids. They weren't vicious and nasty. They stole a few things. They weren't really bad. 1962. It was the beginning of the Vietnam

ALB: In your earlier films , you had similar imagery.

KA: I mean the fact that I made them would make them similar. That I was attracted to it in the first place. I wasn't emotionally involved with *Scorpio Rising*. I was emotionally involved with the people in other films.

People like Anais Nin [who] I knew since I was a teenager. She was a great one. She was a pioneer at having all those operations. That was before people talked about it. I don't really approve of plastic surgery. Nerves are cut and things. Anais had the body of a teenager when she was fifty-four. I've seen her nude. Little budding breasts. That was natural, but she had her crows feet and the wrinkles in her forehead done. Finally it got, I mean I tested her one night; you could strike a match off her forehead. She couldn't feel anything up there. It was just like she had a shot of novocaine.

And the same thing happened to Marlene Dietrich's breasts. She had implants to hold them up and you go knock, knock and it is like knock, knock. The inside hardened and they're [unable] to open it up. She's got hardened sponge inside her breasts.

ALB: Who are your favorite filmmakers today?

Olympiad and *Triumph of the Will*are great works. Whether they are selling Nazis or selling Ford motor cars has absolutely nothing to do with it, they are gorgeous works of art. It has nothing to do with the ideology she had then. She doesn't have it now. She realizes. She doesn't apologize. It was glamorous, powerful. She said, "You have no idea. Hitler was terribly hung up sexually. He could hardly get it up." He was very puritanical. Puritans are dangerous people. I don't go to see modern movies.

ALB: How did you bring *Hollywood Babylon II* up to date if you don't go to films now?

KA: It's not a book about movies. It's a book about the people who make them.

ALB: Have you kept the same corps of friends over a period of time?

KA: Friends? Who mentioned anything about friends? I don't have any friends. I am proud of the fact that I have no friends. If someone says that they are Kenneth Anger's friend, watch out! Maybe they will say that after I've died, but you better check with me. I don't believe in friends.

ALB: I thought Anais Nin was...?

I'm independent. I always have been. I've never shacked up. I've never had a lover because I've had hate relationships which I found quite interesting. I do not have a friend in New York City. A friend is somebody you can go borrow $100 I bucks from for the rent, right? I don't 1 have anyone like that. I confide in my diary. I've been writing that since I was seven years old. I'm a pagan. I believe in the force of nature, which is what pagans believe in. I'm a sun worshipper. I love light. Lucifer means "Bringer of Light." He is the guy who comes and lights things up. I love light. I worship light. I love rainbows, I love colors, but friendship is one of my pet peeves.

ALB: Did you ever want to marry?

KA: No, no. I am totally a loner. If I'd had children they would have been thrown out the window. When I was mugged — July 8, 1978, ten o'clock at night — I woke up at midnight in Metropolitan Hospital. They were putting stitches in my head and I was out for an hour and a half totally out. The head nurse said, "Do you have any friends or is there anyone we can call? Don't you have any family?" I said, "I don't have any family and no friends." She said, "Do you know anyone who can come and collect you because you shouldn't walk home alone. You might faint and fall down." I said, "Well, okay. Call up so-and-so." Who refused to I come and pick me up. He was smoking grass in his apartment with some trick he picked up. He is someone I've known for twenty five years, but I wouldn't call him a friend. I haven't spoken to him since.

ALB: Do you fear your vulnerability?

I've been that way since I was a little kid. I wouldn't join the Boy Scouts, I wouldn't go to Sunday school. There were lots of no's and won't's. I continue that way. I wouldn't pay taxes for years and years.

ALB: Do you pay now?

KA: I have to. I get royalties. Luckily I'm I not in politics. If I was in politics I would have purges of the clients at Studio 54.1 would go in there with a machine gun and mow them all down. I'd have my death squad do it. I've fantasized about that. The Seventies.

There are things I really dislike about the Seventies. Like among women, I hate Bianca Jagger. She symbolizes everything I hate in a woman. That kind of calculating hustler. I've known her since she was thirteen. She was like a nymphette. She was like a Lolita. Like the Polanski scene. She knew what she was about. When Mick Jagger invited me to their marriage on the Riviera, there was a chair for me in the third or fourth row among [the] elite inner circle or something like that and I said, "Thanks, but no thanks. I'll come in a few years and attend the divorce."

I knew that things would fall apart. He didn't like my saying that. I always tell what is the truth, what I think is the truth. I don't care. Who cares? When he started going with Bianca, he started wearing a cross. A great big golden cross on his chest. I said, "That looks so tacky. That looks like a whore in Tijuana." A cross! He was going to have a Christian marriage and all that crap.

KA: Listen, he's a masochist with women. She used to treat him terribly. And he loved it, for a while. She would say, "Get me another diamond." She was a materialistic demon that he invoked. She wanted diamonds, money, houses. He did graduate from the London School of Economics, which is why he [held] onto his money and why he's not letting her get away with the divorce finances now.

ALB: Do you think that rock stars have replaced the old Hollywoodstars?

KA: In the sense that history repeats itself as farce.

ALB: Do you consider yourself gay or bisexual?

KA: Ugh, I hate labels. The label that I reject one hundred percent is "gay." I am not gay in the sense that most of the time I am mean and gloomy because I am a manic depressive. As a magician I'm open to any possibility that life can give me. It has never given me Isolde if I'm Tristan, which I'm not. And I just don't have any interest in second best. If I can't find the Juliet or the Isolde or whatever, I'm not interested.

always break down. Do you know what Andre Gide said? "A friend is someone who always lets you down."

ALB: Are you really leaving New York?

KA: I'm leaving New York because this is the city where I got mugged and someone that I've known for twenty five years, a New Yorker, refused to come and collect me in the hospital. I need what I call geographical therapy. In the 19th century, before psychoanalysis, they used to say, "Go take a sea voyage." I have deliberately blocked out the outside world. The windows here are closed up with cork. It's so noisy I've sealed the windows. I've sealed myself away. From this room you could never tell this is New York City. It could be anywhere. The '30s were my childhood. That's the period that fixates me. It's the only time I relate to.

[Points to a kitchen wall papered in Hollywood memorabilia.]

That cartoon there is a real rarity by Walt Disney himself. One of the early Mickey Mouse ones, but the only one where he mentioned opium.

[indeed: verified by a close look at the cartoon]

ALB: Did Walt Disney really use opium?

This interview has been excerpted from *BAD BOYS: A Compendium of Punks, Poets and Politicians* with text and interviews by A. L. BARDACH and photographs by MARCIA RESNICK. It will be published in Spring 1981.

BardachReports

"Ann Louise Bardach is the authority for anything concerning Cuba, fidelis(mo), and the Havana-Miami nexus today."

Tom Wolfe

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